'The way to write a phone call': multimodality in novices' use and perceptions of interactive written discourse (IWD).

This is a report on the nature of interactive written discourse (IWD) as produced and experienced by a particular group of users.

IWD is normally classified as an aspect of computer-mediated communication (CMC). The latter is defined here, after Herring (1996:1) as: 'communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers'. IWD is often distinguished from other types of CMC by its synchronicity (Werry, 1996).

Specifically, my focus is on the multimodality of IWD with reference to speech and writing.

Participants

60 beginning undergraduates studying Human Communication during 1999 at a university in the UK received their Language module online. The students were initially strangers to each other as well as to their new study context.

A 'chat' facility formed part of a suite of communication tools on the course. In questionnaires, 60% of the students classified themselves as never having worked online before, or having worked online a long time ago and with little memory of it ('online' being defined as using webpages as well as bulletin boards and chatrooms). Although the group was relatively inexperienced in this new communication context,
none of the participants can be considered novices in terms of their own communication skills; and as students of Human Communication they were already oriented to the exploration of new communication contexts.

Scrutiny of the IWD use and perceptions of this group, therefore, allows some insight into the ways expert communicators deploy their existing resources of speech and writing in a novel context.

**Data**

- Approximately 30,000 words of IWD data produced by the students as part of their online course, and collected in the form of chatlogs. The software used was WebCT: see fig.1 for a sample screenshot.

- A pre-course questionnaire to assess students' ICT competence; and a post-course questionnaire to assess anonymously how students experienced the 'chat' tool.

- After the course ended, students were also interviewed as a group and given their chatlogs to read.

Figure 1. WebCT 'chat' screenshot (see separate file)

**Models of speech and writing**

It should perhaps not be surprising that speech and writing in general, and common spoken or written genres in particular, have formed a yardstick for the description of new CMC tools. Collot and Belmore (1996) cite Spitzer's (1986) collection of comments by academic colleagues using CMC for the first time as follows:

'Talking in writing', 'writing letters which are mailed over the telephone', 'a panel
discussion in slow motion', 'using language as if having a conversation, yet the message must be written' (Spitzer, 1986: 19).

These comments parallel the current marketing of new communications by companies such as British Telecom and Mannesman, where hybridity is expressed by disrupting expected collocations:

BT: E-mail, the new way to write a phone call.
Mannesman: Turn the telephone on, it's time to watch the news.

One of the difficulties when faced with impressionistic accounts such as those above is that, while they are engaging in an imaginative sense, they offer little detail about the speaker's model of spoken and written language. Remaining vague about models of language can suit those with certain kinds of vested interest: for BT, for example, there is a useful indeterminacy in describing email as 'the new way to write a phone call', allowing appeal both to the phone-phobic and the phonophile. In other contexts, however, a lack of transparency in thinking about speech and writing can have more obviously deleterious effects. Consider the following (personal notes, November 1998):

A group of staff who were writing online courses for students discussed the various WebCT communication tools. One colleague remarked that the chat facility (ie the IWD system) would enable those students who performed 'better orally than in writing' to be more successful.

I would suggest that this example illustrates the strongly oral connotations attached to the word 'chat', strong enough to prevail in the speaker's cognitive
framework even though he knew very well that the chatroom software runs on Javascript (ie written text). It could be argued, in terms of Lakoff's (1987) account of metaphor and conceptual categories, that the speaker was downplaying the sound/symbol distinction between speech and writing, and playing up some other aspect of potential difference, such as synchronicity. Whatever aspect was being considered salient is unclear, as the speaker did not elaborate. But what is very clear is that the speaker's model would have profound implications for how users were assessed.

The discussion above is intended to set out some ground and indicate my position on it. I see 'speech' and 'writing', 'spoken' and 'written', 'oral' and 'literate' as terms that are anything but transparently descriptive. At the same time, the connotative power of particular genres, such as 'chat', is being harnessed by the communications industry for their own purposes. This situation results in problems for academic description. For example, I prefer to use IWD after Werry (1996) because I want deliberately to problematise the apparently seamless connection that has been made in commercial contexts between a form of electronic discourse and spoken language. This connection also exists in the academic terms 'netspeak' (Crystal, 2001), 'chat system' and 'internet relay chat' (see Werry, 1996, for discussion).

One of the problems with using speech and writing as apparently transparent categories is that, historically, there have been many changes in how notions of speech and writing have been viewed, resulting in a complex picture. For example, older notions of 'the great divide' (see Gee, 1990 for discussion) held: 'that writing makes possible verbatim memory and abstract and sequentially logical thought, and that written discourse is decontextualised or autonomous, whereas
nonliterate culture is associated with constructive memory and concrete and rhapsodic thought, and that spoken discourse is context-bound' (Chafe & Tannen, 1987:392).

These characterisations have been countered on all fronts: the supposed difference in mindsets (Finnegan, 1988); the supposed autonomy of writing (Street, 1988); the supposed non-collaborative nature of writing (Heath, 1983). Similarly, formal distinctions between speech and writing as systems of communication have been questioned and found wanting. For example, Crystal's summary of distinctions: 'Speech is typically time-bound, spontaneous, face-to-face, socially interactive, loosely structured, immediately revisable, and prosodically rich. Writing is typically space-bound, contrived, visually decontextualised, factually communicative, elaborately structured, repeatedly revisable, and graphically rich' (Crystal, 2001:28) only holds for certain genres of speech and writing. As Tannen (1982) has shown, contrasts such as factuality and interactivity are very much predicated on using casual conversation as the prototype for speech and essayist literacy as the prototype for writing.

If such notions of binary contrast were seen as problematic before the development of new CMC genres, their application to electronic discourse, particularly to IWD, renders them useless. In operating both visually and synchronously, IWD is simultaneously space-bound and time-bound. IWD is both spontaneous and revisable (Biber's (1988) 'interactive' vs. 'edited' categories). In considering the 'face-to-face' aspect of communication, IWD involves 'presence' if not face visibility; and for some scholars in ICT, 'presence' is less about physical visibility than impressions of agency or communicative force (Stone, 1995). While graphically
rich, IWD can also be seen as not entirely without prosodics if the focus is on rhythm rather than, say, voice pitch.

Corpus-based work by Biber (1988) on 'styles of stance' does avoid the perils of binary contrasts between speech and writing; and this method, where texts are typed by the occurrence of clusters of linguistic features, has been used by some CMC analysts (for example, Collot & Belmore, 1996). However, this approach loses sight of the users in all their situated contexts. This is no small omission. For example, Biber (1988) sees the genre of personal letters as expressing more affect (as encoded in lexical and grammatical usage) than face to face encounters. Rather than seeing a lack of affect as the result of the behaviour of 'texts', I would argue that Biber's corpus material, based overwhelmingly on the language of middle class participants, at best shows the discourse 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1991) of certain social groups. Although work in the 'stance styles' tradition does escape the problem of seeing speech and writing as discrete systems, then, the approach falls foul of the idea that texts are stable entities regardless of the users.

**Mediated discourse theory (MDT)**

In exploring the multimodality of IWD and other CMC genres, the task is to find a set of principles for discourse analysis that are able to consider the particular constraints and affordances of different communication systems, while also paying attention to the users in their situated contexts - 'situated' not just in terms of their physical setting, but also socially and politically. In my view, Mediated Discourse Theory (MDT), envisaged by Scollon (1998, 2001) as a 'programme of linkages' between historically diverse schools of discourse analysis, may well support such a project. In what
follows, I propose to set out some of the tenets of MDT and consider their usefulness in relation to my data.

Scollon sees MDT as based in interactional sociolinguistics, which has as its raison d'être:

'The ways in which people in communication with each other mutually construct the situations they are in and their identities in those situations through discourse' (Scollon, 1998:147).

Focussing on language-as-action rather than language-as-text, MDT shares the approach of pragmatics-based theories to see language as a form of social behaviour, as mediated action. However, Scollon's concept of MDT ensures that texts remain seen as the actions of real communicators rather than as the embodiments of a priori classifications. The importance of this can be seen, for example, in his notion of sites of engagement, highlighting as it does the 'windows' in space and time whereby texts are appropriated for use. The complex network of relations that exist for individuals as they appropriate different texts for action and therefore negotiate their participation in social events is characterised by Scollon as a nexus of practice. And finally, the principle of texts as mediational means establishes texts as the means by which sociocultural practice becomes instantiated in human action. A key issue here is the idea of polyvocality:

'Communication…must make use of the language, the texts, of others and because of that, those other voices provide both amplification and limitations of our own voices. A text which is appropriated for use in mediated action brings with it the conventionalizations of the social practices of its history of use. We say not only what we want to say but also what the text must inevitably say for us. At the same time, our
use of texts in mediated actions changes those texts and in turn alters the discursive practices'. (Scollon, 1998:15).

Within the tenet of texts as mediational means, a crucial question then concerns the way in which the indeterminacy suggested above is used by participants to position themselves and others.

**Data & Analysis**

Scollon's notion of sites of engagement seems to have a particular resonance for IWD in general, and for my IWD data in particular. All genres of course involve issues of 'where' participants are, but parameters of indexicality are reconfigured in CMC genres, where Stone (1995) claims we face 'the architecture of elsewhere' - a reality that cannot be tied to any stable location. IWD's 'architecture' combines synchronicity with apparently disembodied visual symbol: one can see the contributions of invisible remote others arriving on the screen as if by some process of fairy magic. IWD users therefore have to find ways to understand and exploit these new points of reference.

My participants explore a number of different orientations or 'laminations' (Goffman, 1974) in their framing of location: geographical region of origin; university site where they are logged in; and where they are logged in on the same site, the area of the computer room they are occupying. These dimensions are illustrated in the two data samples that follow. Note, as well, how some of the students in Sample 2 playfully resist their course tutor's more profound questions about identity by constructing a deliberately banal characterisation of themselves as 'Joe from Joeville':

**Sample 1:**
Natalie>>yeak
Natalie>>sorry yea
Simon>>why yeah
Rachael>>where are you Natalie Hale so I know who I;m talking to?
Natalie>>i dont mean it like yeah man i mean it like yeay
Simon>>what is the difference
Natalie>>i'm at john dalton
Rachael>>OK
Natalie>>it's happier and less cheesy
Simon>>and that is worthy of a yehah

Sample 2:

RyanW>>hello
Simon>>are right joe
RyanW>>not bad yourself?
Natalie>>joe?
Simon>>everyone is going, yes joe
Andrew>>Joe is a great guy
RyanW>>manchester thing
Simon>>manchester thing
Natalie>>echo?
Andrew>>liverpool thing
Simon>>everyine must love joe
RyanW>>joe is sound
The group interview data provided further insights that relate very directly to Scollon's notion of sites of engagement. One idea that was voiced by many of the participants was that it was difficult to remember what was going on, in order to make sense of the chatlog. When I pursued this idea, it transpired that participants were often in the same room, enabling the IWD to be integrated with face to face chat. Students talked about actively seeking out others visually. Language use which attempts to locate others physically is therefore regularly seen in this data: for example, in Sample 1 above. At other times, participants specifically mention being physically proximate. For example:
Sample 3:

Janine>> I feel silly sitting next to you and having a conversation like this

Although a popular notion of the 'chatroom' is of a text-only tool where participants are anonymous and remote, a more frequent use of such tools is likely to lead to many different types of situation, each with its own configurations as different communication modes are grouped together and appropriated in particular ways. For example, these same students have gone on to use Microsoft Netmeeting where they communicated with students in Sweden via the simultaneous use of 'chat' tools, videocam and sound, with groups of students sharing one computer. In the Netmeeting output, as here with WebCT, the nature of the written language that was produced was highly shaped by its multimodal situation, not just in terms of which channel is taken up at a specific moment, but also in the reference points contained within the writing itself. For example, the participants in Sample 3 engage in extensive play involving mutual teasing. This results in utterances such as the following:

Sample 4:

Janine>> You speak like this - jhfuiefckj jhfu vdj aqwkeojew fjda woeirj vuhr urthre;

Whatever spoken language was exchanged between these students is lost; but the fact that they could hear each other is important when considering the force of the
utterance above, where the joke relies heavily on the disruption of expectations following the use of the verb 'speak'.

When the students talk about the difficulty of understanding the chatlogs as written text, they are clearly referring to the more 'embodied' way in which their IWD worked. This includes examples such as the previous one, where participants were physically proximate, but there are further ways in which embodiment was realised in the original IWD output, even where participants were working in isolation. For example, consider the following extract, where students are discussing the connotations of colour:

**Sample 5:**

Lucy>>does anyone know what a blue joke is?
RyanS>>no
Lindsay>>no
RyanS>>blue movie
Andrew>>dirty, rude isn't it?
Lindsay>>r u gonna tell us?
Lucy>>blue movie what's that?
RyanS>>mmmmmm….naked
Andrew>>dirty, rude isn't it?
RyanS>>rude
RyanS>>dirty
Lucy>>it was on the colour article
RyanS>>isn't it
Lucy>>I think it must be
Andrew's playful repetition of, 'dirty, rude isn't it?', picked up in turn by Ryan in a three-line reiteration - 'rude', 'dirty', and 'isn't it' - strikes the eye as a form of visual patterning when looking at the chatlog as written data. However, it must also have been experienced as a temporal phenomenon by the participants: the real-time nature of IWD foregrounds rhythm - normally included within speech prosodics - as well as the spatial dimensions usually associated with writing. Samples 5 and 6 are typical of the way participants in my IWD data use multimodality in playful and creative ways to position themselves and others.

The slightly risqué nature of the interaction in Sample 6 invokes a further aspect of sites of engagement. Scollon pays tribute to Critical Discourse Analysis in his development of MDT, locating one of the strengths of CDA as its focus on the idea of texts as discourses of power (see, for example, Fairclough, 1995). Although MDT's concept of sites of engagement focusses principally on the appropriation of texts for use in social contexts, the work of CDA scholars reminds us that texts are always situated socio-politically and that conflict should be expected as bids for power meet resistance. This is taking the idea of sites of engagement towards a more conflict-oriented model. The fact that my students were ejected from the university library at one point simply for using my course IWD tool (there is a university ban on the use of chatrooms) forced me to think about the tensions inherent in using these texts in educational spaces; and the enforced compromise, which was to replace my IWD icon (a pair of chatting lips) with our very dull university logo, gave me pause for thought about public signifiers of 'serious' and 'frivolous' language use.

If the notion of sites of engagement is a usefully plastic concept allowing
consideration of the situated nature of the participants, MDT's interest in polyvocality, after the work of Goffman (1974, 1981) and Bakhtin (1981, 1986), proves a creative tool for thinking about how participants' shape their IWD contributions as they draw on previously known genres and reconfigure those texts for a new communication context. In Tannen's (1993) terms, this involves a new kind of 'frame', as participants re-draw their space with new items foregrounded; for Kristeva, a new set of 'enunciative positionalities' (cited in Moi, 1986). For example, there are clear examples in my IWD data of the type of opening, pre-closing and closing routines quarried in detail by researchers in the CA tradition (see summary in Hopper, 1992). In this IWD context, there are ways in which some of these expressions are reconfigured in order to exploit the affordances of the medium. For example, in what I have elsewhere called 'broadcast messages' (Gillen & Goddard, 2000), chatroom incomers entering multi-party conversations often exploit the mass communication aspect of the IWD situation by using group greetings such as 'hello guys' or 'hello people'. At the same time, the fact that an early entrant can write a greeting up which doesn't 'degrade' sets the IWD context very much apart from the phone call genre. In the case of the early entrant, then, the lone participant who is expecting others to arrive can have a 'hello' firmly inscribed, not just to greet incomers but to register his or her own presence in perhaps a more existential sense.

While in the cases above, greetings more familiar from spoken contexts are given a new visual and more permanent form, other intertextual re-shapings involve the manipulation of written texts in an attempt to represent the subtle nuances of speech noises: see, for example, Sample 1, where participants focus on some different interjections - 'yea', 'yeah', 'yeay' and 'yehah'; or Sample 6, where a participant uses 'wey hey'. These examples illustrate what Goffman (1981) terms 'response cries',
conventionalised blurtings that are expressive forms of language often conveying reactions to unexpected events. Goffman refers to the complexity of such interjections, noting the doubly symbolic nature of some of them: for example, in saying 'tut-tut', we use a speech form based on a written expression where the latter is supposedly imitative of a speech form.

The intertextuality that is at the heart of MDT’s principle of texts as mediational means clearly functions in my IWD data as a strategy for the participants' identity work. The nature of this intertextuality is often an adaptation of others' contributions, so that what emerges is a collaborative structure which has both a set of internal relationships and a set of external reference points to other texts and voices. For example, in the following:

**Sample 6:**

Nadia>>Andie can you stop your twitching please

Glyn>>thanks

Andrew>>~I don't

RyanS>>simon?

Glyn>>your name has been added to the list you will not see another sunrise andrew

RyanS>>the blair twitch project

Alexandra>>So your a twitcher then Andy

RyanS>>smack my twitch up

RyanW>>the wicked twitch of the west

RyanW>>or wirral

Nadia>>Whos going to America next season in our course
students use intertextuality at a number of different linguistic levels simultaneously: via phonological and graphological patterns, via lexical adaptations, and via reference to particular cultural artefacts - the Blair Witch Project, the rap lyric, Smack my Bitch Up, and The Wizard of Oz. In constructing these references, the participants can be seen as claiming for themselves a kind of group membership via their shared cultural knowledge. This is understandably important in this context where participants are engaged in forming relationships and working out what it means to be part of the student community. But the themes that are played on can also be seen as significant, in that they construct representations of the online medium. All these references connote a kind of menace - the horror of the Blair Witch Project, the violence of the rap song, the wicked witch of the Oz film. It may be that being online with relative strangers stimulates particular themes - in this case, ideas of dis/embodiment and the unknown intentions of 'invisible' others- which are then explored as subject matter in the ideational sense (Halliday, 1985). But even with a menacing theme, play is not so far away: Ryan Walker's 'or wirral' (an area near Liverpool) is a wonderful piece of bathos.

There are many further occasions where playing in those spaces afforded by speech-writing relationships allows, simultaneously, both participant-positioning and medium exploration. Although applied in very different ways, the idea of 'liminal' spaces as used by Rampton (1997) to explore issues of identity and positioning among
UK black adolescents may well have relevance here. Rampton's work suggests that his participants' polyvocality creates a space where they can perform different identities in order to gauge their instrumental power; in my data, participants could be seen as working a liminal space configured by multimodal references in order to do something similar. For example:

**Sample 7:**

Dawn>>get off your high horse young man!
Sorcha>>god andrew what have you started
Simon>>John wants to know how long people are going to be here for
Natalie>>at least the original high horse isn't here
Andrew>>I'm no god, but thanks for the compliment

Dawn's 'get off your high horse young man' in the sample above can be seen as a piece of popular idiom which relies for its effect on the idea of a particular kind of speaker - a genteel older lady who is something of a martinet. For British English speakers, this utterance calls up a specific kind of voice - not just female, middle-aged and middle or upper class, but RP-accented, too. A kind of Lady Bracknell (from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*). To this extent, the utterance depends on connections with *spoken* language for its force. And yet, a little further on in the interaction, Natalie seems to be approaching the idea of the 'high horse', not as part of a popular spoken exhortation, but as a *visual* image:

Natalie>>at least the original high horse isn't here
It's as if seeing Dawn's utterance written out has given Natalie a form of 'schema refreshment' (Cook, 2000), whereby the 'high horse', embedded for a long time in a well-worn popular saying, has suddenly acquired a new and startling visual representation. Natalie expresses this by using the modifier 'original', signalling that, for her, the old cliché has come to life in an interesting new way.

In the same way, the exchange between Sorcha and Andrew relies for its effect on grapho-phonemic relationships: the lack of punctuation allows ambiguity, with two different readings associated with different intonation patterns. Andrew then chooses to read 'god' as a modifier rather than an expletive. This allows him to demur on the topic of his god-like status, while also pointing it out.

Lone talk (termed 'self-talk' by Goffman, 1981) is no exception to patterns of polyvocality and positioning. Examples such as 9, below, illustrate Bakhtin's (1981) claim that even monologic utterances are audience-oriented, and, thus, dialogic.

**Sample 8:**

RyanS>>pooo

RyanS>>helo

RyanS>>hello?

RyanS>>ooooooiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!!!!

RyanS>>oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi oi

RyanS>>excuse me

RyanS>>are you there

RyanS>>fine

RyanS>>be like that

RyanS>>by then
Goffman reiterates Bakhtin's view that even solitary talk is social, offering his own examples of speakers 'blurting' out a response when surprised or shocked by a turn of events. However, Sample 9 appears to demonstrate a more extensive fantasy construction, something that we might associate more with the egocentric speech of young children (Vygotsky & Luria, 1930) than with the IWD output of adults.

The essentially dramatic nature of Sample 9, where a one-sided conversation constructs an identity for two participants, has obvious similarities with literary soliloquy, particularly in the realisation of strong attitudes by the participants: Ryan is aggressively pursuing his recalcitrant and stubbornly silent interlocutor, with little success. Ryan's own view of his lone talk on reading his chatlog was that this IWD context afforded an opportunity for the covert expression of resistance to authority. He likened his language use in this situation with the secret signals one sometimes communicates to oneself about another person where that person cannot be openly gainsaid - for example, the rude gesture delivered from the safe distance of concealment behind a book or magazine.

**Conclusions**

This has been a necessarily brief exploration of the use and perceptions of IWD by a particular group. Generalisations are dangerous, not least because the IWD tool can clearly be used for many purposes, and in different ways by different groups.
However, it does seem possible to review at this stage what avenues are blocked or made possible by certain analytical approaches.

Street (1988) urges us to refrain from the 'generalisations of the grandiose sort' that he sees as characterising attempts to describe whole channels; similarly, Schiffrin (1994) proposes a project of 'microlinguistics', where notions of universals are superseded by those of localised instantiations.

Emphasis on the local and particular is also at the core of MDT, where, because texts are seen as mediational means for social action, textual analysis has to encompass users' situations. While corpus-based work such as Biber's research on stance styles tends to remove the nature of the users from the picture, MDT seeks out connections between users, texts and contexts with an expectation of conflict and complexity because of the 'ideologically saturated' (Bakhtin, 1986) nature of all texts.

Tested against my IWD data, an MDT approach does reveal some important complexities, particularly the nature of participants' simultaneity in their deployment of IWD; and the creative polyvocality in evidence in participants' textual output as they explore the 'enunciative positionalities' opened up by this new communication tool. Such findings can act as a useful counterpoint to those public discourses about declining standards and reduced repertoires of language use in young people as a result of their participation in new forms of electronic discourse.

References:


